

Sabbath Rest and Renewal

Exodus 23:10-13

Matthew 12:1-14

Fast forward to the New Testament for our reading from Matthew: two “sabbath controversies,” where Jesus had run-ins with the Pharisees about sabbath-keeping.

Matthew 12:1-14

12 At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.’ ³He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. ⁵Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”, you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.’

⁹ He left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?’ so that they might accuse him. ¹¹He said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹²How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.’ ¹³Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

This is the word of the Lord!

On this day of worship and rest, let’s talk about sabbath.

I didn't grow up in a Christian home; I came to faith on my own late in high school, so I didn't learn the habits of church going and Sunday school and worship and all of that until I started attending a church on my own at age 18. However, I did learn about sabbath (keeping) in jr. high school from my music teacher, who I'm pretty sure was Jewish. She told us students once: "Practice, but don't work so hard at it that it becomes a burden and you lose your joy of music. You need to take rests. My people (Jewish, I assume, looking back) rest one day a week to refresh ourselves." Then she went on to relate this to music: "Every piece of music contains rests. The rests give the music its beauty and texture and creativity. Without rests, the music would be... crazy. There is no music in a rest in terms of sound, but in the rest is the *making* of music." Years later, as I reflected on that gem of wisdom, it occurred to me that rest is built into the rhythm of music the way *sabbath* rest is built into the rhythm of life.

Not having rests in music, or in life, would be like words on the pages in a book without spaces in between them, or pages without margins. Just to look at that would feel frenetic and anxiety-inducing, let alone not helpful to reading and comprehension. We need rest. We need margin (which is actually the title of a book by Richard Swenson, in response to a frenetic culture that lacks margin).

We need thoughtful rest, not just from paid employment but from routine activities and distractions, and from the bombardment of our senses—t.v., internet, radio, smartphones. The news. Things that can pull us into the vortex of internal activity that can cause us to forget who we are, and whose we are. We need sabbath peace and rest to keep ourselves grounded, and to remember our humanity.

Of all of the Jewish laws and practices, it has been said that Sabbath-keeping became the most important for the Jews in terms of their identity as a people. This practice of setting aside one day a week to cease all productivity—for themselves and their animals, and their land—set them apart as unique and distinct from other peoples and nations.

The pattern of work and rest is found in Genesis 1 (six days of creation and Go resting on the 7th), but the first time God *commands* a Sabbath day of rest is in the 10 commandments—it's the 4th commandment. Now, there are two versions of the 10 commandments: in Exodus (the original giving of the law), and in Deuteronomy (the re-giving of the law 40 years later as they are about to enter the promised land), and this 4th commandment is stated a little bit differently in each. In Exodus, the 4th commandment is stated this way:

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female servant, your livestock, or the foreign resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

In the book of Deuteronomy, the 4th commandment is stated this way (the first part is the same, about all people and animals observing it, but a different reason is given):

[“¹² Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female servant, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident foreigner in your towns, so that your male and female servant may rest as well as you.]

¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

Did you catch the difference? The Exodus version recalls *creation*. The Deuteronomy version recalls *salvation*. In Exodus, the reason for observing sabbath was to do as God did—God worked, then God rested. Do likewise. In Deuteronomy the reason for observing sabbath is because God saved you, redeemed out of slavery, so it’s a day to remember that and be glad and celebrate and give thanks.

These are wonderful and right and delightful *positive* reasons to keep a day of rest, a sabbath. However, the earnest and serious religious folks in the years following the institution of sabbath decided that making and expanding *rules* was more important than building *relationship*, so over the centuries they added more and more sabbath rules and regulations, and by the time Jesus came on the scene there were a little over 1,500 prohibitions of things that a person could *not* do on the sabbath; things that they decided constituted work.

And so, when Jesus arrives on the scene and begins to do things on their list of sabbath no-no's, he gets in trouble for it. Jesus had a lot of disputes with the Pharisees, and many of his clashes with them were about sabbath-keeping. As our passage from today tells us, it's actually what causes them to begin conspiring to do him in.

And as we heard, Jesus calls them out on *their* hypocrisy in breaking the law, and points out that the heart of the law is more important than the letter of the law—that is, it's *people* that matter to God. Peoples' true needs being met does not break the sabbath. It's good to do good any day of the week, including sabbath, if there is a need. Paraphrasing his quote from the prophet Hosea, he says soft-hearted mercy is better than hard-hearted sacrifice. That is what God truly desires.

Now, let's pause for a little contemporary reflection on this, because the Pharisees weren't the only ones in history who got strict about sabbath-keeping.

How many of you have seen the movie Chariots of Fire? It's the story of championship runner from Scotland, Eric Liddell, who says, "God not only made me fast, but when I run I feel God's delight." And part of the story line is that he chooses to honor his Lord, according to his understanding and Scottish tradition, by not running on the Sabbath (Sunday). Specifically, he chose not to run a significant race that had been scheduled on a Sunday, and he suffered abuse for it; even from the king, who argued that he would've brought honor to his country and to the crown by running. But Eric Liddell wouldn't do it.

What do you think of that? Was this good? Biblical? Or was he looking at sabbath more as a rule to be kept because he thought God would be displeased if he ran on the Sunday/sabbath? We might think he was standing by his convictions and truly honoring his Lord, so, good for him. But I wonder, how would you feel if, say, Russell Wilson decided to honor his Lord and not play football on Sundays? It's the same principle. Talk amongst yourselves over lunch about that one.

I wonder what memories you have, from your family growing up, of Sunday, or Sabbath. Someone once said: your great grandparents spoke about

the holy sabbath; your grandparents spoke about *the sabbath*; your parents spoke about *Sunday*; now we talk about *the weekend*. Does that ring true?

I don't have a point of reference for this since I didn't come from a family that went to church, but over the years I have talked with many people who grew up in families where absolutely anything that was fun was prohibited on Sundays—like playing cards or other games (indoors or outdoors), going to the movies, shopping, or reading a good novel. After church you *could* read your Bible and go for a Sunday walk, and that was about it. As it's been said, being Presbyterian won't keep you from sinning, but it will take the joy out of it.

Speaking of Presbyterians, when I spent several months in Scotland years ago, I heard stories about strict sabbath/Sunday-keeping from the motherland (the mother church). From the time trains were first brought to Scotland, no trains ran on Sundays. It was the sabbath. Many of the people I met in Scotland remember when laws began to change and the first train ran on a Sunday. When the first trains ran on a Sunday, protestors (good church people!) stood at the train station and heckled passengers who rode the trains, holding signs that said "You're buying a ticket to hell!" As if God was so very upset that people rode a train to another village on a Sunday to see relatives and friends. That's why I say, the Pharisees weren't the only ones to be rigid about sabbath-keeping.

Much of Sabbath-keeping, or Sunday-keeping, was all about what a person could *not* do—in ancient times and in modern times. Even in the U.S., states had “blue laws.” Anyone remember those? When everything was shut down on Sundays, and even many leisure activities were against the law, like dancing.

But the 4th commandment about sabbath-keeping was given by God as a way of providing fullness of life for human beings: to provide rest and recreation and remembrance of who God is and who we are as human beings created in God’s image; and to remember what God has done for us—and to be God-like in *our* recreation; to rest *with* God and *like* God. Jesus emphasizes in one place that Sabbath was made for humanity and not the other way around, which is a wonderful affirmation.

Prior to the giving of this 4th commandment, everyone worked 7 days a week without end. And the people of Israel are reminded that they slaved away for 400 years in Egypt without a day off. That’s why this Sabbath provision was so important to them. And since we seem to have become a culture that prizes productivity and staying busy 24/7, it’s become relevant and important to *our time*, too. A big reason for sabbath is to remind us that we are not machines that endlessly grind on. We’re human beings, meant to live in a rhythm of time, in cooperation with creation and the Creator.

But in addition to this simply being a gift of *rest* to humans, another gift of sabbath was that it was a humanitarian and ecological provision as well. As we heard from Exodus and Deuteronomy and in the various places where it's restated in the Old Testament, everyone rested, and everything rested: adults, children, employees, beasts of burden and all animals, foreigners (non-Jewish visitors residing in their midst), and even the land. It was complete and total rest. They even provided for a sabbatical year after every sixth year, when debts were cancelled, and the land was to lie fallow and rest and not be worked. So there were environmental benefits to the command as well.

And here is a big reason for all of this (and it's kind of a controversial reason): keeping sabbath once a week, and observing an annual sabbath once every 7th year, ensured a kind of economic equality among the people. Stopping productivity and work one day a week, and taking a sabbatical year, created a situation where everyone was on level ground together. No one could keep working to create more wealth than others. Israel had come from a place (Egypt) that was all about empire and economic expansion. Therefore, to keep up empire and expansion they needed people to stay productive and work, work, work, and in the process of doing this it created a wealthy upper class and a poor lower class. So when God liberated the people of Israel and settled them into a new

land with new laws, he wanted to ensure that ***that did not happen***. God's people were *not going to be like that*. Everyone and everything rested once a week, including servants and animals and land.

The sabbath laws were like God's system of checks and balances on Israel's socio-economy to make sure that no one got too rich, and no one got too poor. God knew that even after leaving the land of Egypt, God's people would still have Egypt in their consciousness and could easily drift back into becoming a society of have's and have-not's. So the sabbath laws ensured that those in society who were intent on getting ahead *had to* take a break, like everyone else, so that the gap between rich and poor would be kept to a minimum. We might say it was a check on greed, and a built-in practice of gratitude and community-building, and trust in God, their Creator and Redeemer.

It's hard for us to grasp how deeply counter-cultural this practice really was. God's idea for his people is expressed in Deuteronomy 15:4, where God is giving clear instructions on the cancelling of debts in the sabbatical (7th) year, and as the exclamation point to those instructions God says, "*There will be no poor people among you.*" Or, "*There will be no one in need among you.*" This is stated in the form of a command. It's not a wish, or a dream, but a command: "There shall be no one in need—no poor—among you."

This is why Jesus affirmed that good can and should be done on the sabbath, that poor or hungry people should be able to glean the fields and eat on the sabbath, and so that healing can happen, and so forth. He's leveling the playing field. It's humanitarian in its purpose and practice.

So, (summarizing), sabbath was created for rest and renewal and remembering and recreation, and rejoicing (all the "r" words; every sabbath is talk like a pirate day...), *and* it was a way to provide a kind of economic equality among the people. The latter purpose seems so far out of reach today, and even Israel struggled with trying to achieve this. By the time of the 7th century BC people who were determined to get ahead were breaking sabbath and engaging in commerce so they could make more money. Just read the prophets... Here's good example from Amos 8:5: "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over that we may sell grain, and the sabbath be over that we may offer wheat for sale,' selling the *sweepings* of the wheat, and practicing deceit with false balances?" He had some more choice words for them after that. Don't mess with Amos! God was calling out a type of greed that overlooked gratitude and rest and celebration and equality, in favor of profit and personal gain. Especially as it harms the poor.

I don't think it's overstating it to say that we live in a culture that knows no sabbath. Not just a day off on Sundays, but any semblance of true rest; rest for the soul. Even if people have the weekend off, they don't seem to know how to truly refresh themselves. We're stressed out, and dislodged from our moorings. The pendulum has swung from strict Sabbath/Sunday-keeping and blue laws, to a treadmill of 24/7 activity (work or otherwise).

But the hopeful sign that I see in the midst of this is that there is a spiritual awakening taking place, and people are realizing that life isn't working this way, and there are movements afoot to take back life and be human beings again. Covid has accelerated this big time as people were being forced to slow down and realize how exhausting their lives were; and how dehumanizing their work life had been. And so we're seeing a monumental shift right now: people are changing jobs, leaving jobs to cobble together an income with other types of work, they're retiring early, moving to another part of the country, changing their lifestyle.

The blessing of the sabbath provision is that it honors us—we are human beings, created in the image of God. We are not meant to live lives of futility and be seen only for how productive we are. Work is good, but living in harmony with God and with creation is what we were made for. Keeping sabbath honors us,

and it honors God. God says 6 days I worked, and on the 7th, I rested; come and rest with me. Be with me.

Now, not everyone can have a true sabbath or day of rest on a Sunday—we have to deal with the realities of the society that we live in—but we can all find and take intentional rest at some point in our weekly rhythm and make space for God and for ourselves. What matters is, when we take it, we're thoughtful about it. When we stop, we stop, and renew ourselves *with intention*. We choose our activity (or inactivity) based on what renews and refreshes us, and helps us deepen our connection to God. We can take small sabbaths throughout our days, or on different days. Mine is Fridays. Sunday is obviously not a sabbath day off for me, so Friday is my sabbath most of the time.

True sabbath time is more than just an incidental blank space on our calendars or simply a day off. Sabbath rest is a time of intentionally connecting with what gives us life and restores balance to our heart, mind, soul and body. We are embodied creatures and so we need to refresh our whole selves. And it can be different for each of us – one person's chore may be another person's rest. For example, gardening. For some it is nothing but a chore to be out in the yard, and for others digging in the dirt may be just what a person needs to refresh their soul and reconnect with the earth and the goodness of creation. The key is to ask

what it is that brings you life, and joy and connection with God, who made us, and who invites us into relationship.

When all is said and done, it's all about relationship with the triune God, who invites us to come away and be with him. The good Shepherd, who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters, so he can restore our soul.

“Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest” Jesus said. This is Jesus, who was followed by hordes of people longing for his miracles and hanging onto his teaching – that’s how we usually think of him: busy. But the gospel writers tell us that Jesus would just as often send people away or disappear without warning, with neither excuse nor explanation, and retreat to a place of rest, frequently. Even Jesus needed rest, as a human being, and he invites us to rest with him, and in him.